



Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
Submission to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper
September 2019

Introduction

The Central Australia Academic Health Science Network [CA AHSN] welcomes the opportunity to respond to your discussion paper. The CA AHSN was formally recognised as a Centre for Innovation in Regional Health [CIRH] in June 2017. It is the only Academic Health Science Centre with a major emphasis on Aboriginal health, and joins one other CIRH and seven Advanced Health Research and Translation Centres [AHRTCs] which collectively form the Australian Health Research Alliance [AHRA].

The formation of the CA AHSN followed five years of discussions among its partners, and with the National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC]. From July 2017 it received interim funding for a number of research activities as well as establishing the organisation itself.

A major objective of the CA AHSN is to “change the landscape” of health research in order to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement in health through improving health research literacy; generate research that is initiated, developed and carried out by those communities and their organisations; and accelerate the ways in which successful research is translated into action on the ground, whether through enhanced clinical and public health practice or advocacy.

As might be imagined, evaluation is—or should be—embedded in health research, not least in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health domain. *Without* rigorous monitoring and evaluation we cannot hope to have translation of beneficial research outcomes and advocate for change in contributing to Closing the Gap.

Dating at least back to the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody—as well as subsequent royal commissions and other inquiries at various level of government and across all Australian jurisdictions—thousands of recommendations have made to “improve” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives. To the extent to which recommendations have been accepted, enacted and properly resourced, there has been little in the way of evaluation of how well—or how poorly—those recommendations and policies have served Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Instead, what is so common is that when programs or policies fail, we more often than not see a deficit discourse—especially in popular media reporting and political debate—where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are

seen to be “at fault”.

A glaring aspect of this deficit reporting is that governments—at all levels—avoid having a role in failed programs and policies. To put it simply, there is very little in the way of program and policy evaluation—and very often little thought to establishing an evaluation process at the outset of such programs and policies. The *Catch 22*? When things succeed there’s a tendency for much back slapping by those governments.

Thus, we look forward to the results of the Productivity Commission’s approach to developing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluation Strategy as a “whole of government” strategy as a way we can indeed “change the landscape” of evaluation of governments themselves.

1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations and the evaluation of government programs and policies

In very large part, such evaluation of government programs and policies around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs as there is, it is defined and designed by the government agencies that deliver them. There is real or potential perception of conflict of interest in this process. Even where “independent” evaluation is undertaken, the parameters of the process have more often than not been predetermined.

This is a fundamental contradiction in the provision of a robust evidence base to develop sound and evidence informed policies and programs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are well accustomed to being held accountable for the programs they deliver. And, while often subject—rightly—to evaluation processes, the converse is often not true for government agencies themselves.

To counter this, the Productivity Commission should look to focus on those agencies and the policies and programs they administer, so as the agencies themselves can be held accountable for taxpayers’ money in the realm of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

And in doing so, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must have a role in designing evaluation processes at macro and micro levels. This might happen in a number of ways:

- a) In establishing a formal “peak body” at both national and state/territory jurisdictions which would have a voice in setting protocols to be followed in evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and policies—an echo of the “Voice” in the recommendations of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*,
- b) Entrenching co-design, or preferably Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-initiation, of evaluation processes. This would particularly apply to evaluation processes focusing on particular areas. For example, the Aboriginal Community Controlled Primary Health care sector would be charged with initiating and/or co-designing evaluations as to the effectiveness of government policies and

programs in their sector, from funding models to governance issues;

- c) Resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned consultancy services that would replace and/or augment the major national consultancy services that get the overwhelming amount of government work in the evaluation field at present; and
- d) In any case, ensure that evaluation teams prioritise the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their ranks, with appropriate and accredited training and career development opportunities.

2 Planning from the beginning with evaluation in mind to enhance evidence-based action for the future

Too often, evaluation is not seen as an integral part of policies and programs designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations. On at least one critical occasion the results were not acted on.

Just as critically, evaluation processes—even if in place—are often not resourced properly, or indeed for long enough, to produce rigorous results. The following principles should be observed:

- a) Evaluation should be incorporated as a fundamental element of achieving evidence-based policies and programs into the future;
- b) The evaluation process must be properly resourced;
- c) The evaluation design should be independent of the agency delivering/administering the policy/program being evaluated subject to 1 a) to d) above;
- d) The evaluation process and knowledge translation must be subject to 3) below.

3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests to be acknowledged and advanced in the design and carriage of evaluations

The whole-of-government evaluation strategy must take into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to self-determination as acknowledged in international agreements to which Australia is a signatory.¹ Evaluation processes should:

- a) ensure that Aboriginal employment is maximized, especially with the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers;
- b) take into account the diversity of Aboriginal experiences, including cultural practices and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages;
- c) ensure that knowledge translation is a key target of evaluation results—both beneficial as well as negative;

- d) ensure that issues such as Aboriginal community control are satisfied in both design, control and knowledge translation;
- e) ensure the integrity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectual property is recognised and protected;

4 Commissioning of evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs.

A key area that need significant attention is Indigenous engagement and leadership in the evaluation of Indigenous health and wellbeing programs: Taking steps to improve government and non-government commissioning practices.

To achieve this research needs to be undertaken to identify how government (i.e., federal, state/ territory) and non-government (e.g., not-for-profit, corporate, foundation, philanthropic) commissioning practices can better support Indigenous engagement and leadership in the evaluation of health and wellbeing programs in Australia. The research should take into account:

- a) The evaluation processes i.e. the drafting tendering documents, the selection criteria for applicants, the assessment of applications and the assessment of the 'quality' of the evaluation provided by the successful consultant.
- b) To identify the issues, challenges and opportunities for Indigenous engagement and leadership across the spectrum of commissioning practices from the perspectives of (a) commissioners/ policy makers; (b) service providers; and (c) the Indigenous community.
- c) To identify concrete ways in which commissioning can support Indigenous engagement and leadership in the commissioning of program evaluations.
- d) Identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars who are publishing material that is relevant to evaluation which should be drawn on for developing evaluation frameworks and conducting evaluations.

In addition, the Lowitja Institute have commissioned work that is directly relevant to this strategy. Of note is the publication: 'Deficit Discourse and Strengths-based Approaches: Changing the Narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing' available on the Lowitja website.

5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations to be at heart of the evaluation process: a check list

In assessing and evaluating government policies and programs, the following aspirations and objectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations shall be taken into account:

- a) does the policy or program enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self determination and community control?
- b) is the policy or program responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural security in service delivery?

- c) to what extent does the policy or project contribute to Closing the Gap?
- d) does the policy or program strengthen capacity at individual, community and organisational levels?
- e) does it promote and enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership?
- f) to what extent has the policy or program involved initiation and/or co-design by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations?
- g) to what extent is the policy or program based on good evidence?
- h) to what extent is government and its agencies accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations through, for example, reporting progress, successes/failures?

6 Overarching principles guiding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation of policies and programs

The CA AHSN urges the Productivity Commission to devise and recommend the development of a legislative and resourcing mechanism by which a national evaluative oversight body, run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, is enabled to:

- a) design independent evaluation processes that review government policies and programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities;
- b) provide a national approach to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to fully participate in the initiation and/or co-designing evaluation of policies and programs;
- c) provide a national approach to prioritising in evaluating government policies and programs;
- d) provide resources to consider the impact of past and present major national inquiries into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs; the extent to which recommendations flowing from those inquiries have been actioned; and the extent to which these have been successful/unsuccessful.
- e) conduct or commission short-courses in conducting evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

We further urge that the Productivity Commission continues to issue its annual Indigenous Expenditure Report, further guided by the principles above.

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For example, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*